

Environing Empire: Nature, Infrastructure, and the Making of German Southwest Africa

By Martin Kalb. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2022. Pp. 308. Hardcover \$145.00. ISBN: 978-1800732902.

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Southwest Africa was a colony of the German Empire for just about thirty years. And yet, its historical significance went far beyond what that rather short period of time may suggest. Over the past twenty years, books like Isabel Hull's *Absolute Destruction* (2004) and Jürgen Zimmerer's *German Rule, African Subjects* (2021) have revealed the impact that German colonial policies had on individuals and institutions both in Southwest Africa and in Germany. Martin Kalb adds another important chapter to the growing literature on the only German settler colony, focusing on the interplay between the hyper-arid to arid environments of the protectorate and German infrastructural projects aimed at making the territory and its inhabitants legible, manageable, and controllable. This emphasis is well chosen, foregrounding the issue which German colonial officials and settlers deemed most central for a successful and lasting colonization of the deserts and rugged mountains of Southwest Africa.

Following a thematic and loosely chronological organization, the book starts with a chapter on the history of the southwest African coast before the arrival of the German colonizers. It gives both an environmental and an economic introduction to the territory, focusing on the activities of Europeans who sailed the often-treacherous waters searching for whales, fur seals, and guano. The second chapter recounts the early German colonial inroads into Southwest Africa, from the trade station of the tobacco merchant Adolf Lüderitz to the difficulties of the German colonial administration to establish a safe harbor and access routes through the coastal Namib Desert to the territory's interior. Moving towards the turn of the twentieth century, the next part of the book covers the German efforts to establish a real foothold in the territory, based on expert knowledge and African labor. The third chapter focuses on the construction and improvement of transportation infrastructure as well as the development and use of inoculations against the Rinderpest, an epizootic that devastated cattle herds in southern Africa in the 1890s. The Rinderpest robbed many Africans of their livelihood, shifting the balance of power in favor of the colonizers. Dealing with perhaps the most central issues for the German colonizers, the fourth chapter delves into the water question that defined much of German colonial activity in Southwest Africa. It recounts the often-scattershot attempts by German administrators and settlers to secure access to water in the arid environments of the colony. This formed an integral part of the "battle against nature" mindset that many German colonizers adopted and that runs like a red thread through German activities in Southwest Africa.

The remaining three chapters deal with the impact and the legacy of violence in the colony, focusing on the Herero and Nama Wars that shook the colony from 1904 to 1907. While Kalb relies largely on the existing literature to retell the history of the hostilities and the German genocide, he adds noteworthy new material that shows how closely logistical issues and infrastructural projects were connected and central to the German army's blunders, tactics, and self-perception. Once again, the "battle against nature," waged with German arms and technologies, reappears as a leitmotif. The last chapter focuses on post-genocidal Southwest Africa and describes the German plans to create a "model colony" based on diamonds, large-scale farming, and forced African labor – plans that were forestalled by the First World War and, ultimately, the Treaty of Versailles that stipulated Germany's loss of all colonial territories, including Southwest Africa.

Richly illustrated with a multitude of photographs, maps, and drawings, *Environing Empire* manages to connect the themes of conquest, transformation, and destruction in an admirably comprehensive and analytical fashion. It shines in combining the extant literature on German Southwest Africa with new material on infrastructural projects that, as Kalb argues persuasively, are vital for understanding German colonial designs and failures. The book also succeeds in foregrounding the often-forced labor of Africans that was crucial for German projects in the colony. This labor was not only physical: much of the environmental expertise of the colonizers was based on African knowledge. While the circulation of ideas within the colony is thus drawn in great detail, *Environing Empire* could have benefited from a closer look at connections between Southwest Africa and other German and non-German colonies in Africa. Both knowledge about arid environments and ideas about environmental transformation tended to cross national and colonial borders, as experts looked for models and examples in other, environmentally analogous places. This, however, is but a minor critique of an otherwise impressive study of the environmental dimension of German colonialism in Southwest Africa.

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The Atlantic Realists: Empire and International Political Thought Between Germany and the United States

**By Matthew Specter. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022.
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To call a book thought-provoking can be taken as damning with faint praise. But in this case, it is simply the apt description. Matthew Specter has written a truly excellent book that invites the reader to question their preconceived notions about a subject with which they probably felt familiar. Specter seeks to provide a genealogy of realism. In doing so, he posits that realism is a historical artifact, rather than a value-neutral, objective tool of analysis based on the ancient and immutable laws of international relations. Specter deftly demonstrates the ways in which realism developed through a two-way interchange between Germany and the United States, as well as how the American definition of “geopolitical” realism as being particularly German prevented Americans from confronting the similarities of their imperial history with that of their Atlantic interlocutor.

Specter locates the beginning of Atlantic realism in the writings and rhetoric of the 1890s, and especially in the work of Americans Alfred Thayer Mahan and Paul Reinsch, and Germans Max Weber and Friedrich Ratzel. Realism, he argues convincingly, “did not descend from *Realpolitik* but from its competitor *Weltpolitik*” (19), to which these four thinkers helped give birth (whether or not they used that word). Thus severing realism’s origins from its generally-presumed Bismarckian heritage, Specter elucidates the connection between realism and the perceived need for overseas empire. This “first Atlantic realist moment” (50) lasted until World War I. The period that followed is often thought of as one in which Wilsonian liberal internationalism dominated thinking on foreign relations. But Specter detects instead the emergence of a second Atlantic realism, coalescing around German and American geopolitical thought. The received wisdom was, in fact, based on a construct generated by thinkers like E. H. Carr.